

GENDER AND IDEOLOGY  
IN THE DISNEY  
BEAST FABLE

By

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An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for Honors

In

The Department of English

The School of Arts and Sciences

Rhode Island College

2013

## Abstract

The Walt Disney Corporation is one of the dominant ideological state apparatuses of the last eighty years. One of the ways in which the Walt Disney Corporation naturalizes a particular ideological value system is in the animated feature film's representation of gender. Using Judith Butler's work on gender representation as the critical framework, along with Louis Althusser's concept of ideology, and Michel Foucault's definition of cultural discourse, I analyze and interpret key representations of gender in anthropomorphized animal protagonists within the Disney "Beast Fable" films, *Bambi* (1942), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), and *The Lion King* (1994). My analysis of Disney's beast examines moments of ideological consensualization and resistance within the films' narratives with regards to the representation of sexuality and gender in anthropomorphized animal characters.

## Gender and Ideology in Disney's Beast Fables

### *Children's Film as Social Practice and Disney Discourse*

What is identity? If the individual's thoughts do not originate in the conscious mind, but rather, in the cultural and historical context within which the individual grows and develops, then the possibility that unique "identity" does not "exist" seems plausible, even likely. It would follow, then, that individual thoughts and ideas about the world do not originate in our conscious minds, but rather, they circulate in the ideological discourse of a culture. Michel Foucault maintains that cultural discourses are shaped by those with power who largely determine notions of identity along with wider "theories of reality." Cultural discourses are symptoms of power relations and represent key elements in the construction and organization of social reality and the delegation of varying degrees of social, cultural, and political power (Foucault 50). For the purposes of my argument, I refer to the cultural discourses that inform the popular standards by which a society measures itself as the "dominant ideology" or "status quo." In twenty-first century Western culture, the status quo remains indebted to all things patriarchal, including heterosexuality as the favored sexual orientation, particular definitions of masculinity as the dominant gender, particular representations of race and "whiteness," and Christianity as the "obvious" and "universal" moral and religious system, all of which work together to underpin the ideological presumption that material consumption is synonymous with success and

happiness. These ideological values continue to dominate the discourse of the contemporary era, in spite of the fact that they have been challenged, resisted, and “written over” by various subject positions that exist under a ragged but cohesive set of dominant cultural discourses.

Cultural discourse refers to a system of representation which operates under a set of “unspoken rules” that govern which statements can and cannot be made and which ideas and values wield power in a particular historical moment. In their essay, “Discourse, Ideology, Discourse, Ideology, Discourse, Ideology...,” Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt define discourse as “a term...which...grasp[s] the way in which language and other forms of social semiotics not merely convey social experience, but play some major part in constituting social subjects (the subjectivities and their associated identities), their relations, and the field in which they exist” (474). Broadly speaking, then, discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. According to Bill Ashcroft in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, “discourse is important, therefore, because it joins power and knowledge together. Those who have power have control of what is known and the way it is known, and those who have such knowledge have power over those who do not” (72). Because knowledge is at the center of understanding discursive theory, tracking the circulation of knowledge becomes significant in revealing the kinds of institutions that wield power in a given society, leading us to question: how does one come to identify certain individuals as authors of the cultural discourse?

According to Louis Althusser, cultural discourse is informed by ideology and perpetuated by institutions – what Althusser calls ideological state apparatuses – that have the power to publish an idea in the public domain that then informs the conscious and unconscious “imaginary relation” the individual has to the actual “conditions of material existence” (162). From ideology comes the individual’s subject position within society, and along with the subject position the

individual learns a host of social practices that define the individual's role within society, makes it recognizable, natural, and "obvious." Broadly speaking, ideology teaches us who we are, what we think, and how we should relate to ourselves and to each other. If this is so, then understanding the nature of the messages of the dominant ideological state apparatuses offers a meaningful way of understanding individual identity as "social practice."

Without doubt the Walt Disney Corporation has been and continues to be one of the authors of cultural discourse of the last eighty years, though in fact Disney's influence began as early as the late 1920s. In *The Mouse that Roared*, Henry Giroux analyzes the influence of the Walt Disney Corporation as a paragon of media culture by providing a synopsis of the numerous holdings in which Disney has a controlling interest. These holdings include:

twenty television stations that reach twenty-five percent of U.S. households; ownership of over twenty-one radio stations and covering twenty-four percent of all households in the country; three music studios; the ABC television network; and five motion picture studios. Other holdings include, but are not limited to, television and cable channels, book publishing, sports teams, theme parks, insurance companies, magazines, and multimedia productions. (2)

One of the Disney media networks is the subsidiary Disney Publish Worldwide (DPW) which is the world's largest publisher of children's books and magazines, reaching more than 100 million readers each month in seventy-five countries (3). Giroux writes, "such statistics warrant grave concern, given that the pedagogical messages provided through such programming are shaped largely by a \$200 billion-a-year advertising industry, which sells not only its products but also values, images, and identities that are largely aimed at teaching young people to be consumers" (3). Giroux calls Disney a "teaching machine," by which he means Disney is where children

learn about their subject position via an “imaginary relation” to self, other, knowledge, and power.

Of the institutions which Althusser names as the “Ideological State Apparatuses,” most scholars and media pundits agree that Disney has come to dominate the cultural (literature, arts, sports) and the communications (press, radio, television) apparatuses in a way that only a handful of corporations have been able to do over the past century. It is significant to note that the media conglomerate’s influence also extends most deeply into the media apparatus designed to appeal to children and their parents. What this means is that Disney, among other media ISAs, helps parents raise their children while simultaneously acting as a mediator of the production of reality and the individual’s relationship to Disney’s “real” world. The corporation constitutes what Eric Smoodin calls a “Disney discourse” meant to provide a “Disnified” field of representation designed to interpellate children into a Disnified reality.

I would argue then that Disney, as a dominant purveyor of corporate consumer ideology, is a delimiting force which narrows the individual’s perception of the world and hails the individual as a particular type of subject, while simultaneously inviting the subject into a relation of production in which the child-subject is subjugated to the dominant discourse all in the name of nostalgia, childhood innocence, and a particular kind of consumer-family values. Through Disney the interpellated child learns that to be a part of the “real world,” they must practice values which reproduce the dominant cultural status quo, even if it means they may not be acting in their own best developmental interests. Lloyd de Mause explains the necessity of exploring childhood and ideological interpellation this way:

because psychic structure must always be passed from generation to generation through the narrow funnel of childhood, a society’s child-rearing practices are not

just one item in a list of cultural traits. They are the very condition for the transmission and development of all other cultural elements, and place definite limits on what can be achieved in all other spheres of history. (3)

J. Zornado's *Inventing the Child* takes de Mause's understanding of childhood as its first premise. In his study of childhood, children's literature and cultural reproduction Zornado stresses that the relationship between the adult and the child is the fundamental cultural practice by which the child is interpellated by the dominant ideology (139). He calls this "ideological transposition." He writes that ideological transposition is "the psychodynamic process by which a traumatic and violent culture reproduces itself first and foremost in the lived relations between the adult and the child" and, at its worst, it is an "intensification and refraction of the ordinary generational transmission of the adults' beliefs, values, and desires" (139). He goes on to write that "in the end the child invents his idea of himself from the ideas about 'the child' that circulate in the dominant ideology of the adult world" – a relation which is predominantly characterized by power, domination, and control (140). In this way, then, the child-subject is subjugated to the adult-subject and experiences this process of subjugation to knowledge and power through the domestication of the body.

DeMause suggests that the child's understanding of his or her physical materiality is shaped by the ideological discourse via the social practice through which a child relates to his or her life experiences in an "appropriate" way. For example, the commodification of the child is a symptom of the "media culture," which for Giroux "has become a substantial, if not the primary, education force in regulating the meaning, values, and tastes that set the norms that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions" (3). What problematizes this relation is the fact that the primary aim of the media culture is consumerism: Disney aims to sell a product. Packaged in a

Magic Kingdom wrapper, Disney films not only reproduce a particular value system but also sell the memorabilia that accompanies it, be it in the form of a favorite character plush or a video game where the story can be continuously recreated. Disney films possess as much cultural authority and legitimacy as more traditional sites of learning, though perhaps Disney has more authority if only because representations of Disney discourse can be purchased at the nearest retail outlet. Much like the concept of ideological transposition which informs the child's subject position within the adult world, Giroux warns of Disney's commodification of enchantment and innocence as a process that determines how "children understand who they are, what societies are about, and what it means to construct a world of play and fantasy in an adult environment" (84). In "Children's Film as Social Practice" Zornado continues this discussion with an exploration of iconology – "an approach to cultural and textual analysis that takes as its premise the belief that ideology manifests as social practice, and that culture and cultural forms – a culture's icons – tell a story... icons [which] are secular, assumed, and obvious so much so that they become largely invisible – like the background noise or the ambient atmosphere that we are not aware of" (3). The animated feature film – a genre pioneered by the Walt Disney Corporation – resides in this "ambient atmosphere," rich with icons largely overlooked because of the cultural understanding that these films are "just for children," somehow existing outside of ideology and ideological influence in a realm entirely constructed by fantasy and innocence.

In *Film as Social Practice* Graeme Turner defines ideology as a "theory of reality," implicit in every culture, which motivates our binary perception of good/evil, right/wrong, us/them, among other concepts (133). Turner claims that while "ideology itself has no material form, we can see its material effects in all social and political formations," listing class structure, gender relations, and our idea of what constitutes individual identity as sites where ideology falls



into materiality (133). It describes a system of beliefs and practices that are reproduced within cultural texts and social practices and perpetuated by the institutions which recreate and legitimate the ideological status quo. While ideology authors the texts, it is also the architect of the institutions which emerge in the form of governmental bodies, educational structures, and art – such as film – to name a few. Although Turner does not refer specifically to what Althusser calls the “Ideological State Apparatus,” he does acknowledge that ideology is not stagnant but composed of competing systems all fighting for dominance, a process which is reflected in our narratives. Film, Turner argues, is one place where we can see the material effects of ideology as an organized representation of social and political formations.

In every way Disney animated feature films represent a formidable source of social practice. One of the ways in which the Walt Disney Corporation naturalizes a particular value system is in the animated feature film’s representation of gender. In this study, my analysis of the full-length animated feature film by Disney seeks to read closely, to analyze and to interpret those Disney films which represent gender in the form of anthropomorphized animal characters. Animals appear to us in reality as neutral, androgynous beings only identifiable by genitalia and perhaps selective characteristics such as coloring or mating habits. In the process of representing the Disney animal protagonist with a recognizable gender, Disney animators must (quite consciously) illustrate key gender stereotypes in the form of recognizable physical characteristics or behaviors so that the animal characters’ gender will appear as obvious and natural to both the child and the adult spectator. Turner asserts that for ideology to work as a structuring principle of knowledge and power it needs to appear as though it were “a property of the natural world rather than human interests,” a process which unfolds in the filmic world of representations, among other sites of ideological production and reproduction (115).

The Disney “Beast Fable” depends upon an anthropomorphism that has been largely overlooked even though it is an obvious site of gender discourse which not only naturalizes ideology but at the same time, provides the grounds from which contestation can emerge. Daniel Goldmark and Utz McKnight describe the significance of this field in their essay “Locating America: Revisiting Disney’s *Lady and the Tramp*.” They state:

Unlike other categories of film, animation allows for the easy substitution of the human in both form and content with other living creatures and nonliving objects. Anthropomorphism is, with animation, often a joke shared with its audience, allowing the film even more latitude in pursuing sensitive and potentially explosive political issues without the risk of being taken too seriously. (102)

The process of animation transforms the animal character into an ideological subject (or at least a representation of the subject – woman or man), and as such, is a recognizable feature of the film’s projected “theory of reality.” Accompanying this “theory of reality” and the animal character’s gendered subject position are the “rules and regulations” for enacting the gender identity. For example, within the category of “female” as represented in the anthropomorphized protagonist, there are always predetermined practices and rituals that cultural discourse dictates women to perform, expectations that are especially present, albeit coded and hidden, in the Disney animated *Beast Fable*.

It is the very subject of “woman” and gender construction that motivates Judith Butler’s study *Gender Trouble*, and which will inform my analysis of key animated feature film texts produced by Disney from 1931 to 1994. According to Butler, gender cannot be separated from its political and cultural intersections. Butler’s claim negates the “common sense” argument that gender and sex exist in a one-to-one correspondence. It follows for Butler, then, that gender is

*not* biologically based, but rather, is the result of a cultural inscription written onto the body in the field of representation and within the cultural discourse over a lifetime, beginning, of course, in childhood. Butler maintains that to assume that gender is equivalent to biology is to naturalize a history of oppression and to suggest that change is impossible. Her questions about the nature of gender make a cultural studies approach to media culture, especially Disney culture, an imperative, for if Butler is right, then Disney – because of its dominant status as a media ISA – has greatly informed what it means to be female and a “woman” (as well as male and a “man”) in America through much of the twentieth century. The question remains: what is “woman” and how is she represented in the Beast Fables of Disney animation?

The current field of Disney critical theory has developed over the last twenty years by scholars with interests in feminism, race, class, history, the environment, consumerism, and children’s culture. Scholars such as Henry Giroux, Susan Jeffords, Laura Sells, Elizabeth Bell, Eric Smoodin, and Sean Griffin, to name only a few, have approached Disney discourse in the company’s most popular animated films as a significant site of cultural production as well as contestation. Disney criticism has been most interested in a phenomenon commonly known as “the princess narrative.” Critics maintain that the “princess narrative” follows a consistent, conservative trajectory and aesthetic pattern in terms of the representations of gender roles, which, they say, make a spectacle of the female body-as-commodity. Oftentimes the female characters find themselves as subjects of an exchange, passing out of the controlling hands of the father and into the open arms of a prince. *The Little Mermaid* (1989) is an excellent example of this trope. The princess narrative “represses and redirects [the princess’] desire [for freedom] toward a more ideologically appropriate end...the narrative does this by conflating Ariel’s need for ‘true love’ with her need for freedom” (Zornado, *Inventing the Child* 165). *The Little*

*Mermaid* also illustrates the transfer from father's control to husband's control. Since *Snow White* (1937), Disney has represented the daughter/woman as political, economic, or sexual capital. Above all, the father-daughter relationship depicted in the Disney tradition represents relations of power between adults and children that can be found in most classic fairytales (Zornado, *Inventing the Child*). These relationships are characterized by a beguiling misuse of power by the adult (male) over the child (female).

The Walt Disney Corporation has not been oblivious to the critical claims that Disney films reproduce damaging female stereotypes. Over the course of the last ten years, Disney has responded to these claims by self-consciously trying to offer "politically correct" versions of their female characters. In her essay "The Curse of Masculinity," Susan Jeffords argues that *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) is just such a feminist response to Disney's earlier films. According to Jeffords, the film ridicules the hyper-masculinity valorized in the 80's and favors a more emotional, family-oriented 90's man (163). Arguably, films such as *Aladdin* (1992), *Mulan* (1998), and more recently, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) seem designed to represent racial and cultural diversity so as to extend cultural legitimacy to people of various races and ethnicities. Disney does this by offering their audience (children) a vision of a princess who is outside the traditional "princess narrative." However, most critics have argued that Disney's attempts ultimately fail to represent an alternative princess narrative, and only succeed in further relying on marginalizing and oppressive ideological memes that reinforce European "white" dominance and colonial discourse – the Disney tradition.

Still, it should be noted that instances can be found where moments of political contestation emerge between the cracks of the Disney "princess narrative." One of the most distinct moments occurs during Ursula's song in *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Ursula, the "evil"

step-mother character, sings her signature song not long after we first meet her. She is a morbidly obese, black and gray octopus with an upper torso modeled after John Walters' cross-dressing character, "Divine." "Poor Unfortunate Souls" Ursula sings and as she does she teaches the audience about the very real cruelties of the human world above the water, where "[the men] dote and swoon and fawn / On a lady who's withdrawn / It's she who holds her tongue who gets a man." It's a fish-eat-fish world out there, she teaches Ariel, and unlike her father, who wants her to avoid the human world at all costs, Ursula encourages Ariel to explore, to pursue her dream, and to win her man. This moment also exemplifies a technique that is common to the Disney canon, one I refer to as the "bait-and-switch." Ursula's advice is contradictory in its efforts to both empower Ariel and direct her towards her inevitable, conventional destiny. Ariel has been baited with promises of female agency and self-fulfillment, the independence from her controlling father that she has longed for, but it is not freedom that she purchases using her voice as currency; it is marriage – a future behind a different set of castle walls under the watchful eye of another man. Ursula deserves the ideological analysis she has received from critics like Laura Sells because she represents what is, perhaps, not a unique example of ideological contestation in the Disney canon. Is Ursula's song to Ariel an inadvertent message empowering – rather than mocking – women? Or is she evil and all that she says to be denied?

### *Biology-as-Destiny in Disney*

Critics have largely ignored the question of gender and Disney's anthropomorphized heroes and heroines. As a result, Disney's Beast Fables and how they represent gender offer an opportunity to extend Disney critical analysis. The anthropomorphized animal characters represent for the child a simpler identification, simpler because the animals appear – at least at

first – to be without gender, ethnic, or social identifications. But on closer examination, Disney's Beast Fables are deeply involved with gendering their animal protagonists. Animals appear to be “natural,” or “pure fantasy,” and “innocent,” though in fact, they fulfill, as Giroux argues, the “biology-as-destiny” formula. Giroux writes, “nature and the animal kingdom provide the mechanism for presenting and legitimating caste, royalty and structural inequality as part of the natural order” (107). When creating the full length Beast Fable film, Disney animators take naturalism as their first objective. The film becomes an interpretation of reality that conveys animal characters in their natural settings whose movement and behaviors are suggestive of their human models and counterparts. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the film's creators project and so reproduce the culture's values regarding gender onto the anthropomorphized characters, specifically those characters which inhabit the “realistic” wilderness. The Disney animated feature film appropriates nature and uses it to represent the ideological construct of “man” or “woman” set against the “naturalness” of Disney's “nature.” The representations of “woman” and “nature” are two different orders of simulation. The spectator of the film – especially the child spectator – recognizes the gender of the animal protagonist as “woman” by the subtle mannerisms attributed to her by the artists such as the sway of her hips, the batting of her eyelashes, and the high pitch of her voice, among other cues, all set off against a simulation of nature that is “realistic” and “obvious.” The end result is this: the process of representing the female as fetishized object who exists in nature has the power to make socially constructed gender codes appear as if they exist within nature and outside of human or social influence.

Judith Butler implicitly argues against the ideology of the “natural” woman, instead favoring a theory of cultural conditioning, or nurturing, which forges distinct gendered identities. According to Butler, the common conception of “what it means to be a woman” is influenced by

a non-historical discourse which makes claims to eternal truths or realities – this is the function of ideology. The problem here is that, according to Butler, the subject position “woman” possesses multiple significations. There is no one, single, state of being known as “woman.”

Butler writes:

If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered “person” transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (3)

To understand gender as performative is to understand that the gender role assumes, or interpellates, the individual subject – that is, social practices associated with a particular gender precede the individual’s conscious recognition of ideological interpellation.

In her essay “Conscious Doth Make Subjects of Us All,” Butler considers Althusser’s doctrine of interpellation as “a way to account for a subject who comes into being as a consequence of language,” responding to a call made by an officer of “the Law” (capital L-ideological or discursive law) (106). Butler, however, deliteralizes the call, stating that “if we accept that the scene is exemplary and allegorical, then it never needs to happen for its effectivity to be presumed” (106). Interpellation, in this event, occurs on the level of the conscious, whereby one is turning against oneself and toward “the Law,” in acceptance of the hail’s demand for conformity. Some agency is reassigned to the individual being hailed in this staging, as we are not witnessing a passive receptor of the Law, but a conscious process that ends in assimilation.

Butler states, “although there would be no turning around without first having been hailed, neither would there be a turning around without some readiness to turn” (107). This willingness could be resulting from a relation to the voice of the call before the answer is administered (such as when a child answers to the call of a parent, either by name or subject position – “Johnny” or “my son”) and establishes the individual as subject positioned in language (111).

According to Graeme Turner, ideas which gain hegemony in the field of representation and fall into materiality and social practice constitute the material effects of ideology. According to Althusser’s argument, the Ideological State Apparatuses are responsible for the messages of media and corporate culture. These apparatuses “reproduce the relations of production” and as such serve as an ideological site of cultural reproduction. Through interpellation, ideology transforms individuals into subjects, which then operate within the category of the subject (or apparatus) (174). In ideological terms, Althusser stresses that our experience of reality is facilitated by what he calls a “relation to a relation” – meaning that we are at once twice removed from our actual conditions of material existence. It is significant then, to acknowledge that Disney manipulates gender relations in several different ways. On one level, Disney attempts to represent gender according to the rules governed by the ideology of the era in question. This includes attempts at showing a progressive trend in feature films such as *Mulan* (1998), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) where the films present an ethnic heroine who endeavors to fulfill her own dreams without the aid of a man. However, the second level is the one in which Disney ultimately fails in achieving this end, and falls victim to reinforcing age-old stereotypes about the role of women and men in society and the kind of relationship they have to one another (or representations and relations of sexuality and power in general).



Finally, there is a tertiary level in the narrative where discordant messages or images seem to resist the film's overall ideological agenda, such as the patriarchal truths exposed in Ursula's "Poor Unfortunate Souls" routine. These moments are seemingly unintentional and are usually "righted" by the film's conclusion, or else entirely dismissed and forgotten, but it is within these transgressive moments that the ideological system operating within the film (as a representative text for society at large) is challenged. These moments are fleeting and oftentimes altogether unrecognizable, but it is important to track this resistance to the status quo because it suggests a crack in the process of assimilation and ideological interpellation, and through the examination of not only the content of these "cracks," but also the ways in which the content is resolved by the film's conclusion we begin to reveal the ways in which Disney – and the colluding spectator – reproduce the ideological status quo. Such knowledge can provide a foothold through which we can begin dismantling abusive systems of power. Using *Bambi* (1945) as a formative and representative text of the "Beast Fable" tradition in Disney's Golden Age of Animation (1922 -1946); *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) as a key Silver Age or Eisner Era text; and *The Lion King* (1994) as Disney's pivotal Second Golden Age film, I intend to show an emerging pattern of resilient, ideological undercurrents which contradict current scholarly criticism on Disney and gender performance and undermine the cultural status quo. I also intend to discuss the resolution of these resistant undercurrents in the film's conclusion and the ways in which each film inevitably reestablishes the "dominant ideology" while assimilating more resistant material.

**Disney's Golden Age and *Bambi* as Beast Fable: *Bambi* (1942)**

Disney scholars and historians have revered *Bambi* as the last of the original “Big Five” animated feature films that comprise the Golden Age of Disney animation. *Bambi*, along with the other Golden Age films, achieved for Disney the on-going reputation as a trailblazing artist in control of a studio dedicated to artistic excellence and cutting edge technology in filmmaking. Walt began storyboard meetings for *Bambi* in 1937 while simultaneously working towards the completion of *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), and *Dumbo* (1941), although *Bambi* wasn't released until 1942. It was a tenuous time and Walt Disney Studios teetered on the edge of bankruptcy and corporate extinction. Having been ushered into the Golden Age with a major league production company, RKO, Disney earned respectable revenue because of RKO's distribution to major theatres from New York to Los Angeles. Profits from *Snow White* (1937) along with the films that followed (however marginal) directly funded whatever projects that were currently in production, including a new animation studio in Los Angeles. According to Douglas Gomery's essay “Disney Business History,” in the 1930s the studio rarely earned profits that exceeded five hundred thousand dollars per annum, even with the royalties earned through the successful merchandising partnership with the George Borgsfelt Company (73).

Furthermore, the Animator's Strike of 1941 severely damaged Walt's relationship with several of his artists and delayed production on *Bambi* for three months. Due to economic strain, Walt and the remaining animators were forced to cut several scenes from the original storyboard, only animating the bare minimum necessary to get the story across and push the film's release. Even so, film critics claim that it is this series of edits and narrative simplification that marks *Bambi* as an artistic classic. I would argue that the simpler, streamlined narrative emphasizes the heightened sense of realism in the film, all of which allows for a deeper connection between the

intended child-spectator and the animal protagonists, paving the way for the child's interpellation into the power relations and subject positions represented in the film. David Payne touches on this stringent connection between naturalism and interpellation in his essay "Bambi," in which he recounts the reaction of his young daughter, just shy of two years old, when the baby fawn first appears on screen. Payne writes, "when the film first focused on the birth scene where newborn Bambi lay nestled against his mother, Meredith cooed, 'Oh *she's* little,' . . . In that moment, I was struck that Meredith had no cultural training that would prevent her from expecting that the newborn fawn would be, like her, a female child" (146). Payne suggests that in this opening sequence the fawn is a blank canvas onto which his daughter Meredith is able to project ideas about gender she had already absorbed even as a young child. This signals moments of gender confusion and conflict, particularly as it is related to the child spectator, which will be deconstructed later in my analysis.

When the Disney animators set out to create an adaptation of Felix Salten's novel, *Bambi*, it was important not that they forged an exact replication of Salten's story, but that the story emerged as if nature itself was a main character narrating the tale. Disney animators strove for artistic realism and sought to create characters that represented the "essence" of "real" animals. Animators steered away from the cartoon representations so common in Disney's "shorts," and instead attempted to capture the realistic movement of the wild animal partnered with a full range of human expression and emotion. In order to achieve the heightened sense of realism combined with anthropomorphism, Disney employed the talents of Marc Davis (one of Disney's "Nine Old Men" and one of the first Imagineers) who studied books on children's psychology and the facial expressions of infants to illustrate animal protagonists with the expression and emotions of a child. *Bambi* tells the story of the birth, young life, and maturation of a male deer,

and is a bildungsroman or “coming of age” story<sup>1</sup>. He is the new “young prince” of the forest, and will someday grow up to be the ruler of the animal society. With the aid of his parents and peers Bambi learns about the social practice (language, friendship, courtship) and the dangers which threaten their community. The animals in *Bambi* appear to exist as an almost-human society; they live in a community in which their children play and learn together while the mothers gossip and chat idly and absent fathers maintain “the voice of family authority” (Payne 140). But it is not simply “family authority” so much as it is “patriarchal authority” familiar to an audience in 1942, and today. On the surface level, this is the ideology that the narrative perpetuates; female subordination and domesticity versus male power as the film represents it predominantly through the roles of the mother and father figures. Unlike later Disney films, *Bambi* characters do not actively resist or come into conflict with their social roles in the forest. There are no struggles or attempts made at seizing power – the animals are altogether complacent in their gender roles. The greater, more central conflict in *Bambi* manifests in the power dichotomy between Nature and Man; in this key dichotomy, Nature assumes a feminine subject position and struggles to gain autonomy from the occupation of Man in her forests.

Critics have commented on the significance of Nature in *Bambi* and the greater symbolism that the setting has to the overall scope of the film. In *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, David Whitley argues that *Bambi* is much more than a tale of the life cycle of a deer rendered with stunning naturalistic details, and claims that “the film is capable of engaging with our feelings powerfully because it is also, at a deeper level, a version of the Eden myth. The forest is conjured with a kind of joyful and lyrical delight appropriate for the representation of unfallen nature within paradise” (62). As in the Garden of Eden, all of nature’s predatory forces

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<sup>1</sup> The bildungsroman is a common narrative trope within the Disney Beast Fable genre and also becomes a staple of the Pixar Animation Studios.

are wholly absent; the community which the animals inhabit is both peaceful and somewhat passive. The only force which threatens the sanctity of this community is the distant and invisible threat of “Man.” In Payne’s essay, he writes that “in the marvelous dramaturgy of technical realism, nature would [herself] be turned into motivated action; absolute scenic fidelity would transform ‘nature’ into agent, allowing ‘her to tell her own story’” (139). Therefore, Nature becomes a crucial character in the narrative, a character whose gender is decidedly female and who experiences “Man” as a repressive, violent force. Payne describes the effect in this way:

But in this agonism, a deft substitution is supplied, wherein nature is purified by contrast to “man,” yet nature as feminine is reoccupied by a patriarchal social system that is the fullest perfection of Man’s wish: a single male patriarch with absolute dominion and property ownership of all that transpires in the society, a privilege earned by longevity and wisdom, but the survival and fitness that is the epideictic consummation of scientific realism; which, curiously, is the language of nature invented *by Man* for nature’s own preservation. (141)

The character of Nature, then, which exists in opposition to male values (civilization, power, violence, death), is that which “Man” dominates through the sport of hunting, a masculine occupation which is the systematic rape of Nature by means of the repeated invasion and violation of her natural resources. In the struggle to gain power, Nature and Man face off in two key confrontations; the shooting in the forest that results in the death of Bambi’s mother, and the great fire that ravages the forest and threatens to destroy the animal society near the end of the film. Through an examination of these scenes we can understand not only the ways in which the film works out the struggle between Nature and Man, but also the ways in which the struggle

dramatically alters the social system within the animal community, only to reaffirm the ideological status quo by story's end.

Before analyzing the death of the mother, it seems appropriate to first consider the scene in which the mother deer introduces Bambi to the meadow where her death would later occur. It is within this scene that we first learn about the threat of Man and it takes place about twenty minutes into the film, after Bambi has learned to walk and has acquired language. His mother teaches him that “the meadow is a very wonderful place,” but also is a dangerous place and so they should always proceed with caution when entering. Bambi's attachment to his mother is characteristic of the attachment forged between human children and their parents. In this situation, she is his sole caregiver and is responsible for educating him about their habitat and ensuring that he has acquired all of the necessary skills to function within forest society. On their walk towards the meadow, Bambi remarks with awe to his mother that Thumper (his best friend – a feisty young male rabbit) informed him that they are not the only deer who live in the forest. A fact that is so ordinary and obvious to adults is truly remarkable to the young fawn and speaks to the kind of isolation that he has lived in up until this point, while suggesting the child's fundamental narcissism. This subtle detail also reinforces our knowledge that the only parental care he has received thus far has come from his mother.

The first deer that Bambi meets is the young doe, Faline, who will become his mate later in the film. His initial response toward her is bashfulness and uncertainty, but his mother pushes him into social interaction and toward the doe's curious advances. Bambi and Faline initiate a chase sequence that carries them to the heart of the meadow where they encounter a herd of male

deer engaged in buck fights<sup>2</sup>. This gives rise to an interesting moment worth noting and pausing over. Once Bambi and Faline happen upon the buck fights, they momentarily observe the activity. The camera cuts away from the duo and pans the meadow, showing pairs of deer circling and ramming their antlers into each other before cutting back to Bambi and Faline who are stopped atop a small rock cliff. Bambi's first response to the scene is an attempt at mirroring the action. He rears back, lowers his head and charges toward Faline who sidesteps his advance and flees the frame of the film. Despite Bambi having never come into contact with other male deer before this sequence, he somehow knows (through "animal instinct") that he is supposed to act *like them* and in imitating their actions he attempts to dominate Faline, his female counterpart. The practices of the adolescent bucks will also become his practices and if he is going to live as a male deer in the forest he will have to learn the rituals and behaviors associated with that subject position (which includes dominating Faline) and, the film later reveals, he will have to learn these social practices from the father. During his infancy and youth the film clearly implies that it is acceptable for the mother to be the sole caregiver and many might expect that the film would continue along this trajectory. But in the end the rules of masculinity cannot come from the female, and so the film disposes of her to make room for the father. Bambi must quickly overcome the loss of the mother so he may be interpellated into the male subject position through the father, and at the mother's expense. Something similar is at work in *Lion King*, and even Pixar's *Finding Nemo*, but more on that later.

It is during the winter season that the shooting of the mother occurs. The scene opens on an image of Bambi and his mother alone in the open field, grazing in the few patches of grass that are not blanketed by the snow. This is meant to be a small moment of rejoicing as the

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<sup>2</sup> "Buck fights" occur when two male deer circle each other, bend back their legs, lower their heads and charge at one another, using the antlers to try to dominate their opponent. This ritual usually occurs during the rut (mating season) as a tactic for attracting potential mates.

thawing snow represents the coming of spring after Bambi's first long, desolate winter. The mother becomes alert; she has heard movement in the forest that Bambi and the spectator cannot. She yells for Bambi to run, telling him to keep going and not to look back. We watch the young deer take off and sprint across the river and through the brush, his mother following behind him. It isn't until Bambi reaches the edge of the forest when gunshots ring out in the distance. We do not see the mother fall, but when Bambi reaches the thicket and realizes he is alone, the reality becomes evident. Bambi begins to search frantically for her, shouting out "Mother! Mother!" The background is blanketed by a snowstorm which blurs the scene as though Nature herself were mourning the fawn's loss and the audience's perception of the images become distorted by winter's sudden return. Here we see that *trauma* marks the interpellation of the subject into the world of the father and Subject. In that moment, the silhouette of Bambi's father appears at his side to tell him that his mother can no longer be with him now. The child becomes solemn with the news and his father says only one word, "come," before they disappear into the storm. This is the exact moment of Bambi's interpellation into the patriarchal discourse. The father's command, "come," signifies the hail which Bambi responds to somewhat unwillingly, yet with no other feasible option. The young fawn bows his head low and follows his father into the storm. Bambi's interpellation into the masculine discourse is not yet complete, but this moment marks a shift in the way that the film has represented gender in Bambi and his peers prior to this scene. This shift is at the hands of Man who, through the invisible hunters in the forest, has killed off the mother and ensured the continuation of a patriarchal governing structure by placing Bambi in direct care of father-ruler, the great patriarch of the forest.

To understand how gender performance within the community shifts we must first lay out what the previous circumstances of gender were. This is best shown with Bambi's first walk



through the forest and the introduction of Thumper and Flower. It is with the young Bambi, Thumper, and Flower that the film showcases the separation of gender and sex stressed in Butler's work on performativity, as the traditional expectations of "what it means to be male" are complicated by the group's youth. The spectator views the scene predominately through the young animals' perspective as an invitation to the child-spectator to "see the world" through the eyes of the young animals, and as a result, engage in a kind of projection and identification that includes identifications with the ideologies portrayed in the film.

First and foremost we consider Bambi as the protagonist who appears to the spectator immediately after birth in an almost pre-gendered state. Bambi has not yet exhibited any physical cues that would label him "boy" and exists in a childlike, asexualized condition until language is acquired. Thumper, on the other hand, embodies a more traditional representation of boyhood; he is rambunctious and loud and slightly disobedient. When the film juxtaposes the two characters, it becomes evident that Bambi is the more docile and submissive of the pair; Thumper assumes an almost parental role (a more "masculine" position), as he leads Bambi through the forest, teaching him the names of the creatures and plants they encounter. Their walk, and Thumper's lessons, leads them both into a flower patch, where we meet the third member of the trio, Flower.

Flower signifies a key moment of ideological contestation in *Bambi*. The young male skunk enacts docile, almost coy physical mannerisms and has a high-pitched voice. He represents an ambiguous, almost destabilizing gender. Flower's gender ambiguity suggests the plurality of sexuality in childhood, as opposed to the fixed gender roles of adulthood, all of which is evident through his first interaction with Bambi. Bambi is roaming through the thicket with Thumper and his siblings, learning the names of the creatures of the forest. After several failed attempts Bambi learns his first word, "bird." Much like a child, he becomes excited and is

met with positive reinforcement and applause. He begins calling everything a bird. Thumper quickly corrects him and names the next creature “butterfly.” Stumbling into the flower patch, Bambi singles out a large orange blossom and exclaims “Butterfly!” This error is quickly corrected by Thumper, who teaches him that this plant is called a “flower,” and flowers are very pretty. Bambi mimics Thumper, nuzzling his snout in the flower patch to smell the fragrance. To his surprise, a small black and white skunk emerges from beneath the blossom. The two boys rise up, nose to nose and Bambi exclaims “Flower!” Like the other objects, Bambi has incorrectly named the creature, hailing him as a delicate flower – typically a feminine object. The confused skunk points to himself and says, “me?” (acknowledging Bambi’s “hail”). Thumper laughs at this mistake and tries to correct Bambi, to which the skunk replies “well that’s alright, he can call me Flower if he wants to, I don’t mind.” The small skunk clasps his paws together and rocks back on his heels, shyly burying his snout into his shoulder as he says this. “Pretty, pretty flower!” Bambi yells to the bashful animal, which lets out a high-pitched giggle and responds with “Oh . . . gosh!” He has willingly submitted to Bambi’s call and accepts the name that the young prince has innocently given him. The scene fades out on an image of Flower smiling broadly with his cheek turned towards his shoulder in a posture that appears as coy, demure, and feminine.

While the behavior of the young skunk is flirtatious and coy, there is also a difference to be noted in the way that animators render him compared to the other two characters. Thumper is the smallest of the bunch, but is built to look more solid for his short height and carries a bit of weight. He is the scruffy one of the group. Bambi, on the other hand, is tall and lean. He has narrow facial features that are characteristic of his species but add a feminine touch to his face, which is enhanced by the light coloring of his fawn fur. Flower has a physical build similar to

Thumper in that he is short and plump, but the slight masculinity that is apparent in Thumper is lacking in Flower. The first discernible characteristics are his large blue eyes, which are framed by long, detailed eyelashes. The length of his eyelashes calls attention to the slow, rhythmic opening and closing of the skunk's eyes as he responds to Bambi's call – almost as if he were batting his eyelashes at the fawn. The second noticeably feminine trait is his large, bushy tail. This is also a physical quality typical of his species, but in this case the tail remains in an erect position directly behind the skunk's head and almost gives the impression of hair pulled back into a thick ponytail. In the second scene where we see Flower, winter has just begun and the skunk is hibernating for the cold season. When Bambi asks why this is, he responds with “all us flowers hibernate in the winter” and snuggles up to his tail as if it were a blanket to shield him from the cold.

After the death of Bambi's mother and the coming of the second spring, we do not witness any more of these brief homosocial encounters amongst the group. Bambi is all grown up now and has assumed a more masculine appearance – prominent antlers, darker coloration, brawn, and depth of voice. The first animal that Bambi comes into contact with is the old Owl, and in this interaction it becomes clear that Bambi has been separated from the rest of the creatures in the forest for some time. The Owl remarks at how much Bambi has changed, saying “Y'no, just the other day I was talking to myself about you and we were wonderin' what had become of you.” A reunion of the trio interrupts this conversation, as Thumper and Flower enter the scene. Besides a shift in the pitch of their voices, the rabbit and skunk do not show any significant physical changes. The Owl explains the dangers of “twitterpation” to the adolescent boys (the forest term for “love”) and warns that it could happen to any of them (“yes, it could *even* happen to you” he says to Flower). The boys set out with the determination that they will

not fall prey to “feminine wiles,” only to be plucked out one by one by a female counterpart. Any suggested homosexuality from Flower up to this point has to be resolved and with his attraction to the charms of a female skunk in the flower patch, he is ushered into a heteronormative partnership by the film’s conclusion. Bambi is the last of the boys to become “twitterpated,” but it occurs quickly and is a key step to the completion of his interpellation into the male subject position. This sequence also leads us into the final confrontation between Nature and Man that we witness within the film: the great fire.

Bambi encounters Faline by a small pond in the meadow, and his reaction to the doe mirrors that of his childhood self during their introduction. He stumbles and falls into the water, and as he is trying to shy away from her she leans in to give him a kiss, sending him into a brief dream sequence. The dream sequence is disrupted by another male buck who attempts to dominate Faline. Bambi responds and challenges the deer in a buck fight for possession of the doe, which eventually ends in victory for Bambi. Bambi arises out of the confrontation and strikes the erect pose of his father, with Faline beside him in acute admiration and submission. Despite the genuine affection that the couple shares, their partnership is only achieved through victory in battle. Faline is a trophy which must be “won” and Bambi has effectively earned his mate, thereby completing his interpellation into the patriarchal discourse. He stands atop the rock cliff in the erect posture of the Great Prince of the forest, an imitation of his father.

The couple is not given much time to rejoice in their new partnership before Man’s second attack. Bambi’s father comes to warn him that Man has returned, and this time there are many of him. Bambi rushes to alert Faline, barely arriving in time to rescue her from a pack of hunting dogs that have trapped her on the edge of a stone wall. Faline escapes unharmed but as Bambi leaps towards safety he is shot by one of the hunters. He is wounded but the shot is not

fatal, and as he struggles to get up the camera cuts to an image of Man's abandoned campsite where flames from a neglected camp fire have begun to spread rapidly. The entire forest becomes engulfed in flames, and although the hunters have deserted their game, it was at the cost of the near-destruction of the entire animal community. The film's concluding scenes show each of the animal families emerging from the lake and taking shelter far away from the consumptive fire. Bambi and Faline and all of our favorite characters remain unharmed, and the film reopens on a lush garden which grows amongst the split trees and burnt branches. The narrative has come full circle as the animals rush towards the thicket to welcome the birth of the new young princes, nestled into Faline's breast. Bambi assumes the role of distant patriarch, overseeing the scene beside his father from atop a distant cliff. The Great Prince glances at Bambi before taking his leave, allowing Bambi to inherit his subject position as the ultimate monarch over his own family.

In a transcript record of the storyboard meetings for *Bambi* in the early 1940s, Walt imagines that the conclusion has left the audience with the image of a more hopeful future for the forest. In the climactic confrontation of "Nature vs. Man," the forests are ravaged by a fire which destroys the entire community, though a new society will emerge, and the patriarchal discourse of the forest (and of the audience) will be restored. In an ironic twist from the biblical version, Man becomes the force responsible for the "fall of Eden" and Nature "herself" is reborn with the coming of spring and the new monarchy (Whitley 62). However, paradoxically, what the fire of Man has accomplished is the temporary eviction of Man's occupation of the forest, only to restore patriarchy and allow the rightful prince to rise and rule his monarchy. Nevertheless, Nature emerges from the struggle for dominance against Man as the victor, even if victory may be short-lived and soon undermined by the restoration of the patriarchal status quo. It is a small

triumph for feminism, one in which “the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation” (Butler 3). Unlike the silent ideological influences that govern human society, the patriarchal organization of Nature is not hidden but pushed to the foreground as an instrument towards redemption. With the eviction of Man, the idealized vision of the perfect society – Westernized, patriarchally ruled – has been restored, in what Marc Eliot describes as “the purest evocation yet of Disney’s vision of a perfect world” (Whitley 62), and which carries us into 1950s idealism located in the Silver Age with Disney’s *Lady and the Tramp*.

### **The Silver Age and the Beast Fable: *Lady and the Tramp* (1955)**

Walt Disney’s *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) represents Disney’s nostalgic vision of the “good old days” in America represented as an idealized Victorian town set somewhere in the Midwest. Released during an era consumed by Cold War tensions and social and political upheaval, the film is a commodification of Disney’s desire to return to “simpler times.” Although this fantasy era existed only in Disney’s imagination, it was a persistent vision. Walt and his studio suffered from strain brought on by the Great Depression and again, at the close of World War II, the company wavered on the edge of insolvency (Gomery 75). The studio was sustained by the fast and inexpensive output of live action films and wartime training and instructional videos during the 1940s. The 1950s demanded a reformation of their basic corporate strategy and they were forced to expend millions of dollars to develop their own distribution wing, Buena Vista, in 1953 to replace RKO.<sup>3</sup> *Lady and the Tramp* would become the first animated feature

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<sup>3</sup> After Howard Hughes gained control of the company in 1948 production began to dwindle and RKO suffered its worst years since the early 1930s. Hughes became preoccupied with HUAC allegations and found himself caught in several lawsuits regarding corporate shares and studio stock. Walt Disney anticipated that the studio was on the

film distributed by Buena Vista. Because of the labor-intensive process of hand-drawn animation, the studio could not generate films fast enough to support its distribution arm, and so Disney did what he did best: he turned towards another fantasy and, by force of will and power, he built the first Disneyland Theme Park in Anaheim, California.

Walt's brother Roy Disney approached banks and television networks to pitch the concept of Disneyland, which was initially met with rejection by potential investors. Television networks CBS and NBC were uninterested and banks could not be easily convinced that this park would not duplicate Coney Island (Gomery 76). Leonard Goldenson of ABC agreed to back the Disneyland project if the company would produce an hour long television series airing weekly, to which Walt conceded. "The Wonderful World of Disney" television series in turn kindled in its audience an interest in the Anaheim, California theme park which opened in July 1955. The park proved to be an enormous success.

With television now competing with film, new innovations in film were necessary to keep movies relevant. Cinemascope was a widescreen technology introduced by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox in which the camera utilized an anamorphic lens to take in a wide angle view of an image, allowing a greater breadth and attention to background (Bordwell and Thompson 303). Eager to stay on par with the latest technologies, Disney's *Lady and the Tramp* would become the first ever animated feature to be filmed in Cinemascope. This decision proved to be somewhat problematic for the company, however, as there were a limited number of theatres that could accommodate the new technology necessary to project in the wide-screen format. As a result, Disney released two versions of the film – one with the more common "full screen" view, and one in wide-screen Cinemascope.

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brink of collapse and ended their arrangement with RKO to form his own distribution wing, Buena Vista. The last Walt Disney film that would be released under RKO is *Peter Pan* (1953).

Disney's *Lady and the Tramp* takes audiences back to America circa 1915, complete with horse drawn carriages and at-home births. The setting is charming, idyllic, nostalgic, and evocative of a simpler time. Scholars have claimed that the quaint neighborhood in which the film is set is mirrored after Walt's own childhood town of Marceline, Missouri. *Lady and the Tramp* along with Disneyland serve to romanticize "the good old days" patterned after Walt's idealized memory of his childhood. It should come as no surprise, then, to discover that Disneyland's Main St USA – which premiered just one month following the release of *Lady and the Tramp* – is a material version of the town where *Lady and the Tramp* takes place. An understanding of Disneyland as a monument to the "imaginary relationship" Walt had to the actual conditions of his material existence as a child provides a way of seeing not only into the ideological agenda of the newly established theme park, but also the idealism and nationalistic intentions fused to Walt's profound longing and nostalgia evident in the work of the 1950s. In an article from *American Studies International*, Stephen F. Mills explains what Walt was nostalgic for:

Main Street USA is a monument to an "era of good feeling," a born-again belief in the squeaky clean virtues of front-porch USA, and nostalgia for a supposedly uncomplicated, decent, hard-working, crime-free, rise up and salute the flag way of life that is the stuff of middle America's dreams, an ersatz image of the past imposed within the here and now. The image is composite, deriving as much from 1850s Missouri as from the suburban-small town of the 1950s (glimpsed in the movie *Back to the Future*). (73)

The "ersatz image of the past" is the world represented in *Lady and the Tramp* and what is problematic about the era's "squeaky clean values" is that the discourse of Main Street USA



favors a white supremacist, middle-class, patriarchal hierarchy that seeks to contain and exterminate difference. These values are safeguarded and policed by the force of “man” (in this film, mankind which represents all humans as they are visible and active within the community) through conventions such as the collar and the dog pound, which come to signify class difference and access to privilege. On the surface, the film tells a complex love story of dogs from two worlds, both with very different breeding that defines their social position within dog society as well as within the subject positions of class and breeding imposed by human society onto dog society. The pair must overcome the challenges they face as a result of their class differences in order to be together – a convention which usually resolves itself through the ascent of the character in the lower class position into the upper class structure.<sup>4</sup> But at the heart of the film is a blatant attempt at population control – an allegory for the kind of eugenics associated with Nazi Germany – in which the lower class, racially diverse, unleashed suburban dogs are captured and impounded to “clean up” the streets.

The film’s source material is innocent enough, and the idea for *Lady and the Tramp* was initially presented to Walt Disney by Joe Grant in the late 1930s. The project began with a sketch Grant made of his Springer Spaniel, Lady. Walt loved the sketches and immediately asked Grant to work on a storyboard, which proved to be unsatisfactory because of its lack of interesting conflict. The project was shelved and it wasn’t until 1943 when Walt discovered Ward Greene’s short story “Happy Dan the Whistling Dog” in *Cosmopolitan* that the narrative for *Lady and the Tramp* started to take shape. Greene’s piece contributed the edge that was lacking in Grant’s storyboards and after purchasing the rights to Greene’s short, the animators began work on

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<sup>4</sup> Disney will revisit this convention over the course of the next fifty years in films such as *The Aristocats* (1970), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Tarzan* (1999) and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009).

introducing a new character inspired by the cunning “Happy Dan” – the dog, Tramp.<sup>5</sup> Tramp is the 1950s precursor to what Susan Jeffords describes as “the 80s man,” a single-minded loner who displays moments of aggression and exhibits contempt for the legal system (162). Tramp is a dog of the streets, but Tramp also represents a thread of ideological resistance within the narrative, as he seeks to undermine and overturn the traditional gender roles that the discourse of the “gated community” of collared dogs presents, particularly in its reproduction of an ideology of female domesticity clearly modeled in film by the character, Lady. Through the juxtaposition of the film’s ideological discourses, and via Tramp’s attempts at subversion, the film ultimately limits the opportunities that are available to both the female and the male subject position in favor of perpetuating a nuclear family discourse.

The collar is the iconic symbol of a dog’s identification-with-power-relations in the film, and within a family, and represents a master trope within the film. The collar is both symbolic of the animal’s interpellation into the human family discourse as well as a visual marker for the repressive forces of the community, i.e. the dog catcher, who seeks out the unfit or unlicensed animals for imprisonment, indicated by a dog’s “collarless” state. When a dog receives a collar it signifies a transition into respectability, identification, and “subject-hood” – dogs take on “identity” from the human world when they wear the collar that marks them as “owned” and in their proper place. The film celebrates the collar as a rite of passage, one that indicates maturity and commitment to, and an investiture by, the human family, and the paterfamilias, that naturally and obviously controls the world the dogs live in. It’s significant then when Lady receives her collar at film’s end and she assumes a new air of pride. Her neighbors and best friends, Jock, a slightly gruff but loveable Scottish Terrier, and Trusty, an old sentimental Bloodhound who has

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<sup>5</sup> Grant’s original storyboard focused on Lady’s everyday activities and was set almost entirely inside of her home. Despite Grant leaving the Walt Disney Studios in 1939, some material from his storyboards were retooled in the film’s final version, such as the competitive relationship between Lady and the Siamese Cats and the intrusive rat.

lost his sense of smell, admire the glittering collar and speak with the mannerism of old relatives referring to a girl they have not seen for some time who is now wearing a wedding ring and is all “grown up.” Trusty says, “why it seems only yesterday she was cutting her teeth on Jim Dear’s slippers and now, there she is, a full grown lady. Wearin’ the greatest honor man can bestow; the badge of faith and respectability.” Through accepting this “badge” Lady has also accepted the expectations of the loyal house pet subject position such as caring after the family, protecting the household, and being on her best behavior – social behaviors, ironically, that are also traditionally expected of women (or more appropriately, “ladies”). But Butler’s theory suggests that Lady must already possess these qualities before the hail into the “family pet” subject position is offered, stating that “the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended” (2). The collar earns Lady status, representation, and visibility within the dog society.

It is Lady’s domestic identification and domestic responsibilities that Tramp resists. Tramp represents a “lower-class-masculinity” – free, unleashed, uncommitted, and promiscuous – the stray dog is a dog of many temporary families. “When you’re footloose and collar free, you take nothing but the best,” he says. Lady first encounters Tramp right after she learns that her family is expecting the birth of a new baby, and she is unsure of what this means for her and her position in the household. Having overheard Lady express her anxieties to Jock and Trusty, Tramp waltzes into her yard hailing himself as “the voice of experience” and shocks her with stories about how her life will change after a baby enters the house (or, a “home wrecker,” as Tramp refers to it). Tramp then leaves just as quickly as he entered, leaving her with epiphanic last words: “but remember this Pigeon, a human heart has only so much room for love and affection; when a baby moves in, dog moves out.” The shot dissolves on Lady’s shocked and

concerned expression, leading into a montage that reveals the truth behind Tramp's warning, the climactic moment occurring when Aunt Sarah puts a muzzle on Lady to keep the baby safe. The muzzle is a more punitive and perverse type of collar which Tramp will have to free her from, but which also inadvertently tells the truth about the material nature of collars and how they serve power relations. In this montage of Lady's displacement within her family, the film establishes its ostensible narrative agenda: Lady must be rescued from her domesticated prison, now devoid of the love that made it tolerable, even desirable. Yet, while Tramp spends most of the film trying to solve what he considers to be Lady's problem – her jewel studded collar – the narrative reverses this dynamic and offers a more reactionary reading: that it is Tramp who has the problem, and that it is Lady who will solve it by helping Tramp discover the pleasures of collars and domestication.

Before Tramp can be interpellated into the nuclear family discourse, he first needs to realize that there is something at stake by resisting it. Until now he has received positive reinforcement from his peers and the owners of local businesses, such as Tony – the stout Italian restaurant owner who regularly feeds Tramp (or “Butch” as he calls him) as a reward for Tramp's ability to effectively evade entrapment, understood as both the “life on a leash” and the life behind bars in the dog pound. Lady on the other hand is a model of the repressed female; she only sees the nice houses, big yards, and white picket fences of their community. Tramp tries to show her the endless possibilities of freedom, and she allows him to take her out for a night on the town where he brings her to all of his favorite places and shows her how he toys with the humans. They awaken the next morning to a stunning landscape, and in a final attempt at de-colonizing her mind Tramp says to Lady, “look, there's a great big hunk of world out there with no fence around it where two dogs can find adventure and excitement. And beyond those distant

hills who knows what wonderful experiences, and it's all ours for the taking Pidge, it's all ours.” Lady replies, “it sounds wonderful...but who'd watch over the baby?” and with this Tramp finally has to concede. But Lady's apprehension towards life off-leash is not unwarranted, and as she returns home from her twenty-four hour taste of freedom, the dog catcher seizes her and brings her to a place unfit for ladies of her stature: the dog pound.

In Daniel Goldmark and Utz McKnight's essay “Locating America: Revisiting Disney's *Lady and the Tramp*,” they interpret the dog pound as a site which regulates social inclusion (103). More specifically, they claim that it is linked to the recent memories of Nazi Germany as a place where animals potentially await their death. They describe it in this way:

While there is no equivalence, there is some connection between the image of the dog pound in the film, with the waiting for death and redemption of the dogs, and the recent memory of the Nazi extermination camps, or *vernichtungslager*, for the American audience. What is it that the Disney studio believes we should learn from this association? Rather than reject the possibility of camps in America, the film seems to rely on these very regulatory mechanisms and legal institutions in the form of the pound, to support the Disney vision of making America safe for democracy. (111)

The dog pound functions, then, as a repressive state apparatus which regulates the reproduction of the ideological status quo of the community by determining which dogs are deemed fit for a home, and which are not; the pound controls its prisoners' ability to reproduce more mongrels like themselves. The cell of the dog pound contains an entire “international union” of problematic ethnicities detained by the RSA, including a Mexican Chihuahua (Pedro), a Russian Wolfhound (Boris), a Mutt (Toughy), a Bulldog (Bull), a Dachshund (Dachsie), and a Shih Tzu

Maltese (Peg). The animals are characterized by thick accents and an uneducated vernacular. They wear a look of exhaustion with dark rings around their eyes and have a general unkempt appearance which is especially noticeable when positioned next to Lady's bright eyes and groomed coat. It is immediately apparent to us that Lady does not "fit in" with this group of dogs, and from the moment she enters the cell Bull and Toughy begin to taunt her for the shiny blue collar around her neck. Peg jumps to her defense, demanding that the pair lay off of her while Boris tells Lady that "wearing a license here, that is like waving red flag in front of a bull." "That's your passport to freedom, honey," Peg says, and any dog locked in the pound would give their left foot for such an accessory. It represents citizenship in the "real" world. The incarcerated dogs understand that the more time you spend locked up, the less likely you are to make it out alive. This cruel reality is shown through the shadowy figure of "Nutsy," a small dog of an indeterminable breed who is led out of the pound by one of the dog catchers and towards the "one-way doors." Although we only get to see the shadow cast by Nutsy, it can be inferred that he has mentally deteriorated (presumably from his confinement). His supposed insanity is evident both by his nickname as well as his scruffy appearance and fitful walk towards extermination.

Nutsy's scene in the dog pound signals to the audience that a similar fate awaits the other dogs imprisoned at the pound. The dogs who share their cell with Lady are fully aware of this fate, which is evident through their efforts to escape. But the film never tells us whether or not they are successful in breaking out of their confinement, and we are left to assume the worst. This is problematic because the demographic of the breeds that inhabit the dog pound are predominantly lower-class, uneducated, and either foreign or mixed breed. These are the types of "animals" that need to be taken off of the good, clean streets of Main Street, USA as a "natural"

function of the ideology and social practice that perpetuates Main Street. The subjects of the dog pound are invariably produced and maintained through the political institution itself, and their escape is seemingly unattainable because of the ways in which the social structure and the power relations it comprises determines the detained dogs' identities and their ultimate fates. In other words, for the system of the dog pound to function effectively, the imprisoned animals need to be re-educated and domesticated – via the RSA because of their resistance to the ISA – in order to keep them tractable. Butler discusses the interaction of such political systems and the constitution of identity in this way:

Juridical notions of power appear to regulate political life in purely negative terms- through the limitation, prohibition, regulation, control, and even “protection” of individuals related to that political structure through the contingent and retractable operations of choice. But the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures. (2-3)

Lady is safe because she comes of the right kind of breeding – and she has fully embraced the ISA of her social class – and so her subject position exists outside of the context of the dog pound. She wears the collar as a visual indicator of her upper-class, interpellated identity; the collar is an indicator which humans take notice of, such as when the dog catcher liberates Lady from her imprisonment and says, “you’re too nice a girl to be in a place like this” – thus suggesting that Lady’s status as “pure bred” is threatened by the mongrels, or, “foreign” dogs in the pound. This reinforces the collar as a symbol of power within the film; those dogs with licenses will return home upon the discovery of their belonging to a family, while those dogs without owners are incarcerated and eventually put to death at the pound (Goldmark and

McKnight 111). The point here seems to be that with the proper breeding and class position, your life may be spared if the dominant culture comes to claim you. If not, then the pound represents certain death for stray dogs without a collar, without an owner, and without a privileged subject position within the dominant ideology. “Privileged” in this context is relative to the subject position of the stray dog who exists “outside” the gated community, but still “within” the wider frame of the gated community’s ideological discourse which includes both “home” and “dog pound.” As a result, the collar represents a form of repression and violence for the strays – it is a muzzle in every sense – while for the house dog the collar represents a “badge of honor” (as Jock and Trusty call it), which the strays do not deserve.

Peg is the only other representation of “woman” that the film represents other than Lady, and she is deserving of a moment of analysis. Animators render Peg with the clichéd hallmarks of a worldly, middle-aged “lady of the street.” She is a bleached blonde, washed-out Maltese who moves with a slow swagger and whose eyes droop languidly and appear bleary and unfocused. She represents the fate of the woman who is “unworthy,” the one who resists the family discourse and who seeks the freedom of being off-leash, and becomes corrupted as a result. Her freedom does not belong to her as it does to Tramp and she finds herself trapped, as Lady is by her collar, but within a different kind of prison– the bars of the dog pound. Peg lusts after Tramp and his independence despite her knowledge of his philandering. But Peg seems to know, like the other dogs who share her cell, that Tramp cannot keep up with his playboy antics. Boris suggests that someday Tramp will meet someone different, a more “delicate, fragile creature who is giving him a wish to shelter and protect” (“like miss Park Avenue here” Bull gestures towards Lady) and when this does happen, it is under the spell of “true love” that Tramp will grow careless; then, “the Cossacks are picking him up and it’s curtains for the Tramp.”



But Tramp is the exception to the rule, and the film never actually puts him behind the bars of the dog pound. His worthiness is determined by his interpellation into the upper-class dog community. He has discovered what is at stake: Lady's admiration and affection, and in a small confrontation with uncontained nature, Tramp earns his entrance into the nuclear family discourse. Nature in the form of a large black rat invades Lady's Victorian mansion home with the presumed intention of killing the newly arrived human baby. The rat is a threat to the reproduction of the ideological discourse of the dominant culture, representing the uncontainable "wildness" of nature (symbolic of the "wildness" of Tramp and the shelter dogs) and in short, is the part of nature that *must die*. We find at the beginning of this scene that Lady has been chained to a dog house by Aunt Sarah and can only bark helplessly as the rat enters the yard and quickly finds its way towards the rain gutters and gains access to the window leading to the baby's room. The rat moves just outside of Lady's reach. Although Lady has dismissed Tramp for abandoning her during her capture at the dog pound, he rushes by her side the moment she is in distress. He risks being captured to protect the infant that Lady has become so attached to, thereby winning his position in the household and regaining Lady's trust. The moment he enters the house he has acknowledged the hail of the "family man" subject position and through the violent death of the rat, sheds his former identity and becomes interpellated into the nuclear family discourse, even as he finds his "true" nature in his domesticated relationship with Lady. The film concludes with a trophy scene of Tramp receiving a shiny, new red collar from Jim Dear, a brood of mixed breed pups tumbling around his owner's feet. This final vision is significant in its allowance of mixed breed subjects into the upper-class community and suggests that redemption is available to those in lower subject positions as long as one observes the rules of the status quo, demonstrates a knowledge of their "place," and finally, proves themselves

worthy of upward mobility. Almost forty years after *Lady and the Tramp* we see its message yet again in one of Disney's greatest financial successes of its second golden age: *The Lion King* (1994).

### **The Second Golden Age: *The Lion King* (1994)**

The Walt Disney Studios came onto difficult times in the 1960s and 70s. After Walt's passing in 1966 and Roy's in 1971, the company struggled for nearly two decades to find a suitable successor. During this time the production of animated features declined, and only five new animated films were released from the time of Walt's death until the early 80s. Control passed to Ron Miller, Walt's son-in-law, which led to an era of economic calamity during which time the company's share of the movie audience slipped below four percent (Gomery 77-78). The company continued to make money into the 1980s as a result of theme park revenues, but the movie division suffered. New film releases could not match up to major blockbuster competitors such as Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) and George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977), which had transformed Hollywood. By the early 1980s America was beginning to see economic recovery as a result of Reagan's Tax Act of 1981 and concentrated efforts on the improvement of unemployment rates, yet Disney's profits remained at a stalemate. Even the installation of Walt's final vision, Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT), failed to add to the corporation's bottom line (Gomery 78-79).

The Disney Studios only narrowly avoided being sold because of a generous investment of \$500 million by Texas billionaire Sid Bass who not only put the Walt Disney Studios on firm financial footing, but also sought out former Paramount Executive, Michael Eisner, and former Warner Executive, Frank Wells, as new management. Often coined as the "Eisner Era," the duo

is credited with reviving “the great American institution” (Gomery 79). The pair employed help from Jeffrey Katzenberg to produce movies under the two new company wings – Touchstone and Hollywood Pictures – and Katzenberg was able to revitalize the floundering Disney movie division, pushing over \$100 million in box office intake with the live action film, *Three Men and a Baby* (1987) which was the highest grossing film the year it was released. A key tool to Katzenberg’s success was his ability to convince others to finance his films by selling shares of future Disney hits. Over 140,000 investors had signed up by the end of the 1980s and accrued a pool of a billion dollars for Disney filmmaking and by the end of 1987, Disney revenues peaked at almost five times the figures on the balance sheets when the trio took over (Gomery 80). This was possible through the expansion of the theme parks as well as the revival of new films and the re-release of Disney classics.<sup>6</sup> Despite the new corporate style there was still plenty of room for Walt’s masterpieces, and the re-releases contributed significantly to profit margins – adding over \$100 million in 1986 alone. Gomery cites that “in October 1987 when *Lady and the Tramp* was released on video, the Disney company had more than two million orders in hand before it even shipped a copy [and] by the late 1980s *Bambi* and *Cinderella* were added to the list of all-time-best-sellers on video” (81).

All of this was not accomplished without heavy extraction from their available resources. Eisner and Wells were able to nearly double their business agreements but also damaged long-standing corporate relationships in the process. Over 400 studio employers were fired and a strike of nearly 2,000 Disneyland cast members ensued as workers picketed for higher wages. While Eisner and Wells sat at the top of the list of highest paid executives in America in 1988, ranking as the highest paid professional managers in the history of American business, they were

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<sup>6</sup> Disney Japan opened in 1983 and plans for WESTCOT Center in Disneyland were set for 1991. However, the plans for this expansion to the California theme park was scrapped in 1995 and replaced with Disney’s California Adventure Park in 2001 instead.

unable to settle with strikers for fair wages and hired “scabs” as replacement until the strike broke down (Gomery 82-83). The company hit another economic pothole in 1991 after the Gulf War, reporting declining profits for the first time during Eisner’s reign. The re-release of new animated features became more staggered. During the summer of 1991, the only Disney movie hit was the re-release of *101 Dalmatians*, which would outgross *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and become the most successful animated hit ever, even when adjusted for inflation (Gomery 84).

Gomery claims that “as the 1990s began, the Walt Disney Company seems to be just another overextended media conglomerate” (85). The company was still high off of the success of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Aladdin* (1991), which are some of the titles that constitute the repertoire of the Second Golden Age of Disney animated feature films, and what modern audiences have come to recognize as Disney classic film. However, the studio needed a hit that would allow them to infiltrate other areas of mass media and draw animation into new avenues of popular culture. The hit they needed would arrive on June 24, 1994 with Katzenberg’s last film for The Walt Disney Studios: *The Lion King*.

*The Lion King* was the first Disney animated film to be entirely based on original material; Jeffrey Katzenberg, Roy Disney Jr., and Peter Schneider pitched the concept for *The Lion King* to a more than skeptical studio team. Coming off the success of *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin*, artists flocked to work on Disney’s other film in production, *Pocahontas* (1995), as it seemed to be the more natural fit. Initially, no one had any faith in *The Lion King* and animators have claimed that the movie came together almost accidentally. The film drew in a star team of artists and composers such as Elton John and Hans Zimmer as well as voice actors James

Earl Jones, Whoopie Goldberg, Nathan Lane, and Matthew Broderick who all came together to create the film that Katzenberg credits with taking animation into the contemporary mainstream.

Another coming of age story, *The Lion King* brings us full circle with an animated feature that recycles key themes and conventions found in the first classic Disney Beast Fable, *Bambi*. Through an exploration of the parent and child relationship experienced through the tragic loss of the parent and set against the discourse of a monarchical society, *The Lion King* tracks the development of our young protagonist, Simba, as he struggles to make sense of his role within “the Circle of Life” – a role which, arguably, is predestined and can only be reclaimed by the rightful prince who must assume his “natural” destiny as king of the Pride Lands. *The Lion King* is the first true Beast Fable since *Bambi*, featuring a cast entirely constructed out of animal characters with no human interaction. The film would permeate all aspects of popular culture by taking Disney to the Broadway stage for the first time with director Julie Taymor – who would later become the first woman to win a Tony Award for Best Direction of a Musical in 1998. With worldwide box office receipts of over \$4 billion to date, *The Lion King* is one of the most successful productions in theatre history and remains the highest grossing hand-drawn animated film of all time (Finch 290).

The film hails the “Circle of Life” as its dominant ideology, proclaiming that every living creature exists together in a “delicate balance of nature.” The kingdom of the Pride Lands is organized by a patriarchal discourse which endows the absolute rule of the father-king, “on whom the *entire natural order* seems to rest” (Roth 16). Mufasa, Simba’s father and King of The Pride Lands, imposes onto Simba the indispensability of the king, who resides at the top of the food chain, a metaphor which signifies the social hierarchy that allocates power to a particular class of creatures and not to others. The kingdom is divided between the predatory lions and their

“lowly subjects;” the animals which feed the lions (such as the gazelles and the antelope) and those that service them (such as Mufasa’s faithful bird-assistant, Zazu). What this speaks to is a discourse of power that values Western relations of power and patriarchy under the guise of African kingship. Although Mufasa speaks in the regal baritone of James Earl Jones, his speech is coded with a “posh British accent” that marks the royal family as a European monarchy despite their African origin (Giroux 105). Critics such as Robert Gooding-Williams claim that “Disney’s Africa is an allegory of Disney’s America” – a Euro-centric vision which denies visibility to the “inner city blacks and Latinos” (represented through the hyenas) who exist on the periphery of Pride Rock in a land of darkness and austerity (3). A model of white colonialism validated by a “biology-is-destiny” discourse, one’s subject position and, invariably, one’s identity is fixed from birth and it is the responsibility of the king to uphold the bio-social order and ensure that every creature “knows its place.” Simba’s uncle Scar challenges the status quo of Pride Rock and is the architect of the film’s central conflict. A political revolutionary who seeks to overthrow the throne and redefine the social order of the Pride Lands, animators depict Scar as an envious, cynical, and somewhat effeminate lion whose childlike mannerisms (such as playing with his food and unwarranted petulance) locate him in the submissive position of “child” in his relationship to Mufasa, who often scolds his younger brother in the way a father reprimands his son. The parent/child power dichotomy is a key structure within the film as it calls into question the concept of “nature v. nurture” and provides an avenue through which we can examine identity construction and the transfer of ideologies from the parent to the child within the film’s narrative, and also between the film and its audience. Within the discourse of Pride Rock, the social practices of the kingdom are conveyed through parental interactions

characterized by intimidation and authoritarianism, echoing eighteenth-century practices of child-rearing known as “the black pedagogy.”<sup>7</sup>

The parent/child relationship between Simba and Mufasa is marked by black pedagogical practices of child-rearing which were characterized by violence, depravity, and manipulation whereby the child was trained to internalize its suffering and submit to the authority of the adult. In Matt Roth’s article “The Lion King: A Short History of Disney Fascism,” he writes:

Although the film takes place in an imaginary jungle, THE LION KING really expounds the Law of the Schoolyard: only the strong and the beautiful triumph, and the powerless survive only by serving the strong. As Disney sees it, children must not only acknowledge the supremacy of those born privileged and violent, the children must *love them*. The young must gaze in hushed veneration at the princely predators who stand ready to harvest the labor and flesh of their subjects. They must learn to giggle at the hopeless scampering of weak and stubby creatures as they dodge the jaws of their overlords. They must accept that true friendship means flattering those who would otherwise feast on their entrails. (15)

Simba and Scar evoke the child-subject from Roth’s passage in their admiration of the very power that seeks to oppress them. The “hushed veneration” that Roth references is the backbone to what critics have declared as the film’s Oedipal Complex. Simba covets the subject position of his father as well as the masculine qualities that accompany it, such as bravery, strength, and

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<sup>7</sup> The “black” or “poisonous” pedagogy is an eighteenth-century practice made popular by Dr. Schreber’s series on child-rearing which positions the adult and the child in a hierarchical structure of physical and emotional domination and subjugation, one which is characterized by violence. The black pedagogy relies on the idea that from early infancy the child is in need of “breaking,” that is, the parent/child relationship is naturally adversarial and measures must be taken to assert adult domination over the infant whose outbursts are merely an attempt to usurp the parent’s authority (Zornado, *Inventing the Child*).

intimidation. He knows his position is one of future power and authority – as evidenced through his breakout musical number, “I Just Can’t Wait to be King” – but the liberation and independence that he lusts after are not representative of the kingship he is destined for. Simba’s misperception of the omnipotence he blindly desires leaves him vulnerable to Scar’s manipulations, and Simba becomes an unwilling participant in the execution of his own father’s death. Convinced of his guilt, Simba is persuaded by Scar to run away from the Pride Lands and to never look back. If we understand Scar to be a type of “surrogate” child under Mufasa’s care then the Oedipal Complex of the film is fulfilled by his successful assassination of the father-ruler and ascent to the throne. Yet while the film heralds Simba as an innocent bystander, I would argue that his inclination to accept Scar’s accusation stems from a subconscious fetishization about the death of Mufasa; as it is only through Mufasa’s death that he can rise to his own natural destiny as king.

Now orphaned, Simba embarks on a journey of self-discovery saddled with guilt during which time he rejects his past identity as “future king” completely. Simba bonds with a wise-cracking meerkat, Timon, and an idiot warthog, Pumbaa – coded as a “gay couple” – and allows himself to be “adopted.” Timon and Pumbaa represent a moment of ideological resistance within the film, though in the end a reactionary social order expels the “bad gays” and rewards the “good gays” according to who supports conservative ideological agendas, and who seeks to subvert them.

Timon and Pumbaa discover the lion cub unconscious on the plains of the savannah and, after determining that he does not represent a threat, adopt him as one of their own. Willing to renounce his past in favor of a new identity, Simba joins the ideology of the forest and embraces its social practices, all of which announces itself through the Swahili phrase “Hakuna Matata,”



meaning “no worries.” Life at the bottom of the food chain is uncomplicated and problem-free, and the pair teach Simba that the key to happiness is being yourself – even at the cost of social acceptance. This is a message that works for Timon and Pumbaa apparently, because they live happily and unmolested as they sing of their own exile and inability to fit in with other members of their species, the first clue which indicates to the audience that Timon and Pumbaa are living an “alternative” lifestyle. They are happy, the film suggests, because even as “good gays,” the dominant culture does not miss them, nor does it register their rejection of the status quo. The status quo simply does not care that they have rejected it. Consider, however, that the Pride Lands utterly die when the “wrong” king – “the bad gay” – has taken power. Clearly, the Pride Lands “miss” Simba – he is not expendable to the social order in the same way Timon and Pumbaa are. The couple have a completely co-dependent relationship, relying on each other for sustenance, shelter, and social contact. They are inexplicably disconnected from all other members of their society, although they inhabit the most colorful setting of the film, which contains the most memorable musical numbers. Timon and Pumbaa eat, sleep, and bicker together in the mannerisms of a married couple. This is no accident. In fact, during interviews with voice actor Nathan Lane, he insists that “Timon and Pumbaa [are] not just homosocial but gay; the first gay couple in a Disney cartoon” (Buhler 119).<sup>8</sup>

Timon and Pumbaa are responsible for effectively raising Simba, which they do according to their own belief system. Surely this is a sign that Disney discourse has become more diverse, for as a gay couple they are not admonished or forced into heteronormative partnerships by the film’s conclusion (unlike *Bambi*, in *Lion King* there is no female meerkat and warthog who will materialize in the forest and lead them into marriage and procreation). On the

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<sup>8</sup> The voice actor for Timon was Nathan Lane; an outwardly gay award winning actor, best-known for his work in musical theatre.

contrary, Timon and Pumbaa are “good guys” and “good gays” who are invited to join Simba at the newly restored Pride Lands and become members of the royal order, *his* royal order. In John Morton’s essay, “Simba’s Revolution: Revisiting History and Class in *The Lion King*,” he states “it is evident that, through the ‘brotherhood’ struck up by Simba, Timon and Pumbaa, *The Lion King* strikes an alliance between the productive working class and the legitimate ruling class” (315). While this breach in the class order is noteworthy, the many cultural memes that have been produced in response to the personal relationship among the trio suggest that the film is actually a thinly veiled advocacy for gay adoption rights. A testament against contemporary arguments that same-sex couples cannot successfully raise a child, Simba emerges a strong, healthy male within their discourse fully equipped to reclaim his position as king and re-establish his father’s ideological, cultural, and social status quo.

Another key architect of Simba’s adult identity is his childhood best friend, Nala, who provides an interesting site of gender contestation. For the majority of the film Nala maintains a position of dominance over Simba, clearly depicted through her ability to continually overpower him in their pouncing and tumbling game. Nevertheless, symptomatic of the patriarchal discourse of the Pride Lands, the caste-royalty system sets the stage for traditional gender roles and ultimately reinforces a binary that favors primogeniture and complete female subordination – evidenced through the dependency of the lionesses on the rule of the male monarch, despite their social role as hunters for the pride. Roth states that, “the lionesses, witnessing the devastation all about them, are strangely passive . . . they abandon all hope until they rediscover Simba, the rightful heir, whom they had thought dead” (17). Nala exerts more agency than the other lionesses in the pride by leaving the savanna in search of food once Scar’s dystopian rule has ravaged the environment.

It is not until Simba and Nala are reunited that Simba becomes aware of the dire situation that has overtaken the Pride Lands. With Scar's ascent to the throne the natural balance of the kingdom has been compromised and the Pride Lands have fallen into famine and drought. Nature itself reacts against Scar's usurpation. The importance of maintaining the caste and hierarchy of the social order is reaffirmed, as Roth states: "when the wrong king comes to power, the lush savanna becomes a wasteland from which even the rain-clouds flee. The king's importance extends to the very firmament" (17). Simba's reunion with Nala also provides a pivotal moment in the constitution of his masculine subject position and Morton argues that "the turning point for Simba's masculinization is a scene where, for the first time in their wrestling games, Simba gets on top of Nala," citing the moment as a Disney first for its sexual explicitness (6). Steven Buhler in his essay "Shakespeare and Company: *The Lion King* and the Disneyfication of *Hamlet*" states that "Nala draws Simba out of an exclusively homosocial adolescent state into a more 'mature' sexuality as part of his preparation for assuming his rightful place as king" (Buhler 125). But Nala has been training Simba for his ascent to the throne since they were children, as it is the skills transferred to him in their pouncing game that enable him to overthrow Scar in their final confrontation and secure his place as ruler of the Pride Lands. In his final attack, Scar lunges towards Simba who, having been thrown to his back, instinctively kicks his legs out, thrusting his airborne uncle off the edge of Pride Rock and into a den of his angry hyena-mercenaries. Simba has reasserted his patriarchal credentials in the overthrow of his uncle's perverse practices and so assures the renewal of the benevolent "Circle of Life" under the sovereignty of the natural, sanctioned hetero-normative, white monarch.

**The New Frontier: *The Pixar Animation Studios***

Although Douglas Gomery could not have predicted the enormous success of *The Lion King* in the early 1990s when he accused the Disney Studios of being “another overextended media conglomerate,” his claim was not unwarranted for future generations of the company which would face economic struggle and a lag in the success of their animated features (85). After a tragic helicopter accident in 1994 that killed the studio’s president Frank Wells, Jeffrey Katzenberg left the company, angry that he was not offered the now vacant position, and he formed DreamWorks SKG in October of that year along with Stephen Spielberg and David Geffen. With the advent of new technologies, the face of animation was rapidly changing, yet the Disney studio animators were not willing to adapt. Animation began a steady shift from traditional hand drawings to Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) which was adopted by a new competitor, the Pixar Animation Studios, from its very beginning.

Established on the principle that “art inspires technology and technology inspires art,” the Pixar Animation Studio was founded by Ed Catmull, John Lasseter, and Steve Jobs in 1986 (Iwerks). Although the company began as an independently owned and operated institution, it was far from devoid of Disney influence. John Lasseter studied at the California Institute for the Arts, founded by Walt in the early 1960s, and learned animation techniques from Disney’s Nine Old Men. Lasseter loved the Disney Studios and was hired into his dream job as an animator not long after his college graduation. His first contribution to mainstream animation was a short waterfall sequence which appeared in *The Fox and the Hound* (1981), but his directorial debut came about in 1987 with the project *The Brave Little Toaster*, after which Lasseter was fired from Disney. Fascinated by CGI, Lasseter was eager to explore the possibilities that this new medium could contribute to storytelling in the animated feature, but the Walt Disney Studios

remained reluctant to fully embrace new CGI technology unless the style would prove to either save time or money in the production process.

It was not long before Lasseter's next big break which came during a Computer Graphics Conference on the Queen Mary where he met Ed Catmull and was hired to work in a new division of George Lucas Films.<sup>9</sup> This division would become the starting point for Pixar. The Pixar Animation Studios represents a new frontier for critical analysis of children's culture. Only twenty-six years old, the Pixar Studios have produced thirteen successful animated features from *Toy Story* (1995) to their most recent film, *Brave* (2012), with each grossing over \$300 million in box office intake, and some grossing over \$1 billion. With the continuing decline of Disney animation, Pixar has taken over as the dominant producer of the animated feature film.

The discourses circulating in Disney's animated Beast Fables continue on in Pixar's computer generated Beast Fables, such as *A Bug's Life* (1998), *Monster's Inc.* (2001), and *Finding Nemo* (2003) where several conventions and motifs that can be found in Disney films are repurposed and recycled in these Pixar classics. *Finding Nemo*, like *Bambi*, depends upon the death of the mother as *the* determining plot device. The film tracks a father's journey across the ocean to rescue his son, Nemo, who has been captured and contained by "Man," which in this narrative, is embodied through a group of fishermen scuba diving in the ocean. Nemo is brought to a domestic aquarium at a dentist's office where, in a scene that mirrors the dog pound of *Lady and the Tramp*, he meets a group of friendly pet-store-bred fish. The fish are envious of Nemo's "natural" home in the ocean, and attempt to devise strategies for their own escape.

In *Wall-E* (2008), the studio attempted a narrative that criticized the damaging behaviors of consumer culture, and appeared to be a cautionary tale about habitat destruction, though the film's warning is disingenuous at best and cynical at worst, if only because the film represents a

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<sup>9</sup> Ed Catmull is the current President of the Walt Disney and Pixar Animation Studios.

hail to consumption and the child-consumer. The release of *Wall-E* reproduces the very discourse that the film warns against. In this narrative, it is at the hands of a robot on which civilization and life must be restored on Earth. Wall-E learns about human civilization through a video cassette recording of “Hello Dolly,” a song and dance sequence modeled after 1950s white American idealism – the exact values venerated in *Lady and the Tramp*. The video of “Hello Dolly” is one of Wall-E’s many treasures that he collects and stores, and from which he learns about hetero-normative relationships, and other common human social practices such as hand-holding and dancing.

In order to survive in the ever-changing entertainment industry, Disney would have to re-evaluate their animation style and adapt their brand to include CGI graphics which had taken popular culture by storm. In 2006 the Walt Disney Studios made a strategic investment of \$7.4 billion to purchase the Pixar Animation Studios, making Steve Jobs Disney’s largest shareholder. Despite the investment made by the new “parent” company, Pixar was allowed to operate as an almost independent studio, and has avoided falling into the trappings of the Disney “princess narrative,” instead favoring the male-centered bildungsroman. The Pixar “coming of age story” is not one characterized by a journey towards the actualization of masculinity as we encountered in the Disney Beast Fables, but rather, Pixar’s male characters are on a journey towards the discovery of the male protagonist’s inner femininity. In “Post-Princess Models of Gender,” Ken Gillam and Shannon Wooden point out that although feminist critique has been unsuccessful in redesigning the princess motif, it has been “effective in rewriting the type of masculine power promoted by Disney’s products” (3). The new model of masculinity defined by Gillam and Wooden’s article outlines the protagonist’s journey as “the revelation of the alpha male’s flaws [through] . . . acute loneliness and vulnerability . . . figurative emasculation through even the

slightest disempowerment, [and] . . . a significant homosocial relationship [which] ultimately matures [the male protagonist] into an acceptance of his more traditional ‘feminine’ aspects” (2).

Previously marginalized identities and social practices – moments of counter-ideologies within the dominant discourse – have gained ground over the past twenty years, so much so that companies like Disney/Pixar include depictions of race, class, and gender in animation that would have shocked Walt Disney. The animated feature film continues to be a dominant form of social practice, one which responds to the ever-changing demands of the discourses within our culture and is deserving of our attention, despite the guise of innocence the film perpetuates with its inherent entertainment value. Best articulated by Robert Gooding-Williams, “a film’s power to entertain can be intricately bound up with its promotion of particular political values. Movies entertain not always despite their political agendas, but sometimes because they are effective in conveying those agendas” (373). We have the ability to identify these political values and dissect the films – and the corporations – for their cultural worth, if only we free ourselves from being Mickey-Minded and think outside of the Disney-powered fantasy.

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